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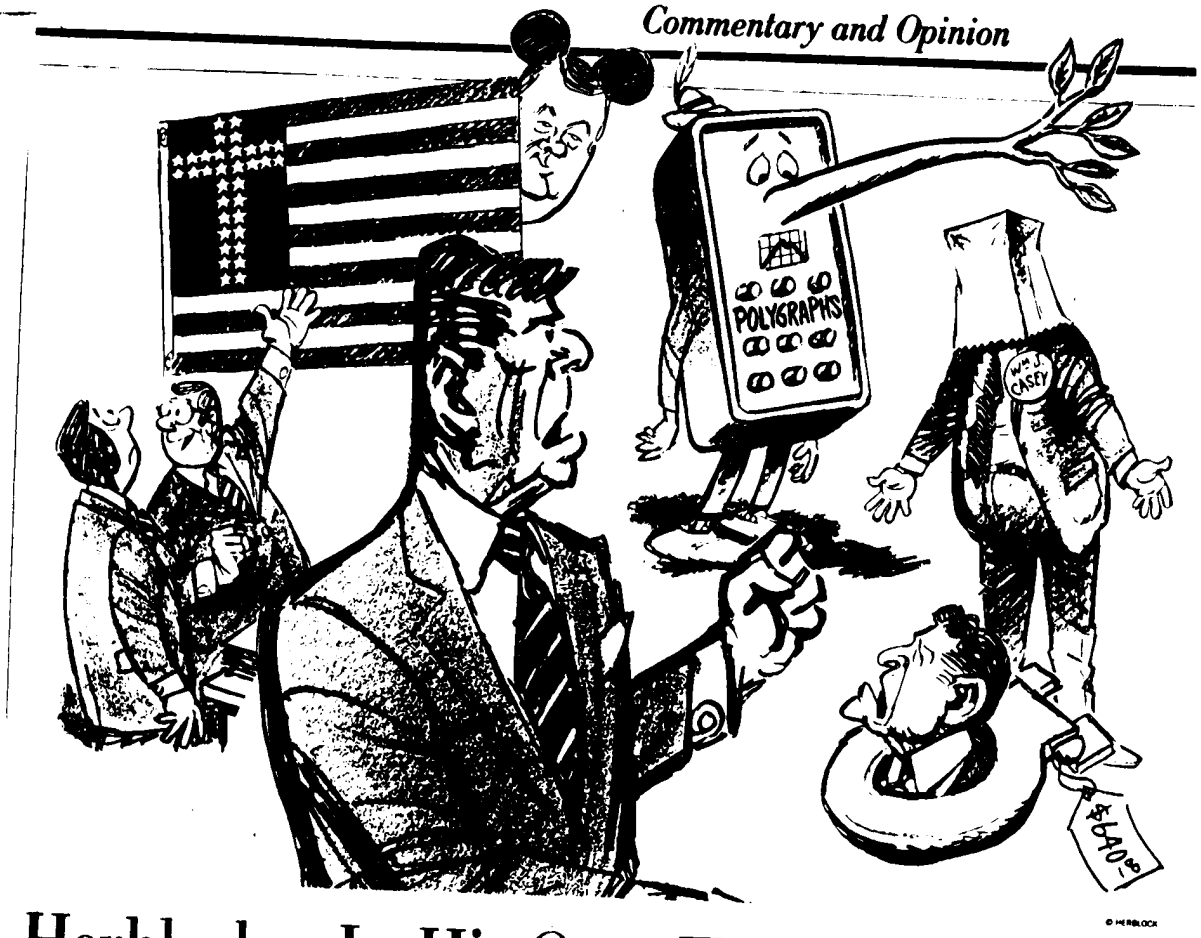

Herblock—In His Own Write

On Knaves, Fools, Liars, Flat-Earthers and Those Who Would Curb Our Basic Freedoms

By Herbert Block

I'D LIKE TO SAY a few words *about* words. In my daily work, I don't get to use many of them and so I mull them over a lot.

"National security" has a fine ring to it, but often serves as a cover for government bungles and misdeeds, and we can well be suspicious of it.

We can also be careful of the term "defense" as in "defense spending." It doesn't seem like the right word for $7,000 coffee pots and $640 toilet seats or—worse—for untested and non-working weapons that keep arms contractors busy but actually endanger our own troops. There are better and more accurate words: Pentagon plans; military jobs programs; or, at the very least, Defense *Department* spending.

One of the most troublesome words is "conservative." It might have applied, say, to President Eisenhower, but hardly to those people who considered Eisenhower and George Marshall to be communist dupes. But such people, or their political descendants, are now described as "conservatives." If members of a group want schools to teach that the earth is flat, they are likely to be described as "conservatives"—as opposed to world-is-round people, who must be "liberals." Except for Lyndon Larouche supporters, there is hardly a group today so far over the right field wall that they won't be described as "conservatives." They are also described as "anti-communist," as if they were more opposed to communism than the rest of us. Political classifications are not easy these days. But whether the alternative term is Radical Right or New Right, or Conservakooks, or something else, there have to be more accurate words for some of the far-out people now called "conservatives."

A word that's come into use lately is "privatization"—the selling off of government properties. Even when government officials turn over public resources to private companies at knock-down prices, this is not called a scandal. It is "privatization."

What we need to be even more concerned about is the privatization of government—the notion that once an administration is in office, the government belongs to the officials running it and that what they do is not the public's business.

For the past half dozen years the Freedom of Information Act has been under attack. More and more material is now stamped secret or classified. This administration has even reversed the policies of previous presidents who worked to declassify tons of old out-of-date documents. It has even *re*-classified material that had already been made public—like dropping it down a memory hole. And information known to foreign gov-

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These policies have not contributed to "national security." They have increased the number of people handling classified material and made it harder to keep legitimate secrets. When everything is secret, nothing is secret.

In the name of national security, the present administration has tried to impose lifetime censorship on former government employes on a broad scale. The director of the CIA, William J. Casey, has threatened newspapers and broadcast networks with criminal prosecution if they report government activities he decides to call sensitive. When a man was about to be tried for spying, Casey even went so far as to warn papers against publishing information that might come out at the public trial.

He also said in a speech that he questioned "whether a secret intelligence agency and the Freedom of Information Act can co-exist for a very long" and that "the willingness of foreign intelligence agencies to share information will dwindle unless we get rid of the Freedom of Information Act." When I drew a cartoon showing him calling for repeal of that act, he issued a disclaimer, saying that he never advocated its total repeal. Perhaps his speeches needed to be translated with a magic decoder ring.

Only a few weeks ago we learned of a national security adviser's memo about Libya that described what *he* called a "disinformation" campaign—one that managed to disinform the American public if not our potential enemies. George Orwell might have smiled at that one, too. Three years ago, when the invasion of Grenada was unfolding, a government official told the press that the idea of such an action was "preposterous" while at the same time the Castro government knew the facts and was reporting them. And lately the administration has conceded the accuracy of Russian accounts of closed-door summit conversations in Iceland.

It bothers me, and I think it should bother all of us, when we cannot believe our own government—when we have to face the fact that some unfriendly government reported events more truthfully than ours. It bothers me when the government is more interested in damning the press and plugging leaks than it is in leveling with its own people. It is not a private government. It belongs to all of us.

But there is an added twist. While there has been privatizing of the public's government, the government has made more and more intrusions into the privacy of individuals.

These have included proposals for domestic spying by the CIA, for widespread government use of so-called lie detectors, and for large scale government "drugnet" operations by urinalysis. The U.S. Supreme Court lately upheld a state law that says some sexual activities, performed in private by consenting adults, are criminal.

be a presumption of innocence, Attorney General Edwin Meese said, "You don't have many suspects who are innocent of a crime. That is contradictory. If a person is innocent of a crime, then he is not a suspect." Meese later said he had not meant what he said. He has also maintained—despite the clear writings of Jefferson and Madison—that the Founding Fathers would find the Supreme Court's view on separation of church and state "somewhat bizarre." And he has called the American Civil Liberties Union a "criminals' lobby."

In a speech last month, Meese suggested that Supreme Court rulings are not the law of the land and found it "astonishing" that the Court's unanimous 1954 school desegregation decision should apply to other states besides the one in which the suit was brought. Meese is pretty astonishing himself, and seems to keep topping himself. Recently he suggested employers conduct surveillance of employes in the work place, in locker rooms, parking lots and "nearby taverns if necessary." This is not a sequence from a Doonesbury strip—this is the attorney general of the United States.

The commission that reported to him on pornography is the same one that sent, on official stationery, an intimidating letter to 7-Eleven and other chain stores targeting magazines that the stores later removed from their shelves. A few weeks ago, the Federal Bureau of Investigation raided some video stores in Virginia and Maryland because they were carrying so-called adult videos. This was done as part of what was called "a general investigation"—without anyone being arrested or charged.

You don't have to be a subscriber to Playboy or Penthouse to ask if you want a government agency or commission to decide what perfectly legal publications can be sold in stores. You don't have to be a pornographic video fan to ask what the Department of Justice's FBI is doing raiding video stores that are not even accused of anything illegal.

The past month has been a busy one for many federal authorities. Patricia Lara, a woman living in Latin America who is a graduate of New York's Columbia School of Journalism, had a visa to return to the United States to attend an honors convocation at the university. But when she arrived here, she was thrown into jail, and then sent back to Latin American—all this without any specific explanation why.

It bothers me when government officials adopt the idea that the state is supreme over the rights of individuals and that officials need not account for their actions.

Perhaps a bulldozing attitude is infectious. I see and hear broadcasts that present people with opposing views. And I notice on some of these programs that there are a few people who not only want their own time on the tube but who keep interrupting and cutting into other people's time—sometimes crying "No! No! No!" or "Bah! Horsefeathers!" Some people seem to have a kind of fanatic zeal, which makes them feel that anything goes.

I bring this up because I think it illustrates something basic. It is not just a matter of "liberals" versus "conservatives," but between those who believe in the expression of differences and those who want freedom for themselves but not for the other guy. There are those who are not satisfied with their own freedom to worship or not worship as they please—they want to make sure that the other guy and the other guy's kids worship. One political evangelist recently suggested that Christians feel more strongly than others about things like "love of country."

I think it's obvious from any study of history that freedom has defended religion better than religion has defended freedom. The late Elmer Davis, a great commentator, said that we in America have had a national faith—a faith in freedom. But it is that faith that is today being eroded by people in government as well as out of government, who would make religious belief a *substitute* for a belief in freedom.

The First Amendment, which protects religion, also provides for free speech, free assembly and a free press. There was never an expectation that free speech and free press would guarantee individual wisdom or accuracy or proper decorum—only that they would serve to insure a free system.

Actually, the press today is far more responsible than it was in the early days of our country, when outrageous accusations and slurs were common currency. Yet today the press as a whole is probably criticized more than it was many years ago.

We all find things in the papers and on television that grate on us, particularly intrusions on private grief—like when the TV cameras focus on some distraught person and keep rolling while the tears roll. There have been enough tears on news programs to short circuit my TV set.

When a newsmagazine interviewed several people for their opinions on the press, one of the most interesting comments came from Frank Mankiewicz. He said that "whenever you see a news story you were part of, it is always wrong." I've talked to editors who agreed that this was too often the case. Tip O'Neill has said that "all politics is local." Maybe all journalism is local, too. The local speeches or garden club meetings are not as important as world summit conferences, but they are just the places where the reader can judge for himself if the paper is getting things straight.

The other day I saw one of those little signs they sell in gift shops. It said, "God loves you, and I'm trying." Fortunately we don't need to try to love what we see on TV or in the papers in order to care about a free press.

I think one of the reasons for a resentment against the press is that when there were several papers in a city—and when political party loyalties were stronger—a loyal Republican could subscribe to a loyal Republican paper while Democrats subscribed to a Democratic paper. And the readers of one paper could de-

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clare that the other one was only suitable for the outhouse. Today there is no way editors are going to please all their readers, even giving them a variety of views.

But there is a more timeless reason why the press can always expect to make readers and government officials unhappy. Politicians who go in for press-bashing point out that we are not elected. That's right—and it's important that we're not. The founders did the electing when they decided that there should be a free press—a press which, in our system of checks and balances, would serve as a check on government itself. The fact that the press is *not* elected and is *not* subject to the same pressures as politicians, is what enables it to perform its critical role—and to say things that politicians don't say.

And since criticism of government means criticism of people who *have* been elected, it is likely to be running against current majority opinion. Complaints go with the territory. If everybody agreed with what we in the press were doing, and if the government felt we deserved a pat on the head for bringing in the daily paper and fetching its slippers, we would have real cause to worry—and so would the country.

In the press—and particularly in broadcasting—there is some fear that if you criticize government, you might be accused of not giving both sides of the story. But everybody already gets one side of the story from government officials every day and night. And opposing politicians, looking at popularity ratings and playing it safe, don't necessarily keep the governing party in line. We should not be frightened by our own polls or fearful of being accused of being partisan. The press often needs to get out in front of the politicians. And its voice should add volume to what the politicians hear from the still, small voice of conscience. The time when speaking up about abuses in government is most needed is when officials may be most popular and when few are pointing out their errors. I think we need *more* good investigative reporting, not less. The way to defend freedom of the press is to use it.

Government actions in recent years *have* had the "chilling effect" on the press we keep hearing about. But if anyone thinks hunkering down will help, he has only to see how the attacks upon our freedoms have been stepped up. We need not just a defense, but a vigorous offense. I share the sentiment of Gen. George Patton who told his wartime troops, "It's not your job to die for your country; it's your job to make the other sonovabitch die for *his* country."

When government officials would curb basic freedoms, it's our job to put them out of *their* jobs.

Herbert Block—"Herblock"—is the Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial page cartoonist of The Washington Post. This article was adapted from his speech this month accepting the Elijah Lovejoy Award, in recognition of "conspicuous contributions to the cause of freedom of speech and the advancement of freedom of the press".